

John Smith
Last Known Survivor of the Microsoft Wars

Roland Hughes



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Table of Contents

Prologue.....	7
Frame of Reference.....	9
The Brine of Life.....	27
Nukes and Nots.....	43
One of the Beginnings.....	53
Cost of Time.....	69
Price of Pride.....	85
10,000 Years and 20,000 Leagues.....	115
God, god and gods.....	143
Time of Rules.....	159
The Flood of Proof.....	183
A Pharaoh, a Plan, and a Script.....	199
Compromise.....	213
The Fourth Book.....	227
The Rejoining.....	239
Our War on Terror.....	255
Epilogue.....	273

Prologue

This is Susan Krowley, reporting for The Times.

This story has been months in its creation but spans decades. Father and mother felt the need to track down the last known survivors of the Microsoft Wars and record their stories for history. We sent skilled hunters out in all directions to counties we knew about and those only rumored to exist.

All this searching expanded our knowledge in ways we did not expect. Some of those places we thought to be only rumor really did exist and some still do. Other reporters will be filing stories in this series to bring you the facts as we found them. What follows is an interview with John Smith, the last known survivor of the Microsoft Wars.

Frame of Reference

SK: I must first thank you for allowing this interview. It has been so long and so much has been lost; we feared we would never record the real story.

JS: Be careful what you wish for.

SK: Yes, well, I'm sure that is good advice. I must say that you have a lot of interesting art hanging on the walls of your place and odd-looking stuff lying around. I can't really even identify what much of it is.

JS: In both life and science you must take one thing at a time.

SK: Can you tell us why they were called the Microsoft Wars and was there really more than one?

JS: You don't have any frame of reference to ask that question.

SK: The searchers did tell you that we wished to interview you about this very subject to record the history, did they not?

JS: Yes.

SK: May I ask then, why you are so reluctant to answer my question?

JS: I'm not reluctant, you simply don't have a frame of reference to ask such a question.

SK: What do you mean?

JS: What do you know about the Microsoft Wars? Not just the wars but what led up to them?

SK: Just that it was a very dark period in human history. Great atrocities were committed and many world governments fell. Large portions of the world are still considered to be off-limits for humans.

JS: You say that as if you don't know what it means.

SK: Say what?

JS: "Off-limits."

SK: It means we are not allowed to go there.

JS: Thank you for the dictionary regurgitation. Now, why don't you tell me what it means?

SK: I've already told you.

JS: And now you should be getting closer to understanding why you have no frame of reference to ask your question.

SK: The only thing I'm closer to is branding you a fraud and leaving.

JS: You are free to do what you wish. Before you can ask the question you wish to ask, you must first have a frame of reference so a meaningful response can be given. You don't currently have any frame of reference.

SK: <sighs> What does off-limits mean in your mind?

JS: It's not a matter of my mind. Those areas of the world are off-limits because the radiation levels are too high for prolonged human exposure. Nature has attempted to reclaim some of those areas and, due to man's arrogance, has created some creatures that are severe abominations. Many of those creatures will not survive once the radiation drops to a safe level. Man cannot eat what comes from there and a bite of any kind can cause radioactive material, if not venom, to enter into the body, slowly poisoning it from within. We have no method

of removing such radiation. A single bite is usually a death sentence, though that sentence may take years to actually happen.

SK: Oh come on, we've all heard stories about radiation. They are mostly there to scare children.

JS: In the past, when there was a massive nuclear disaster, mankind put in a concerted effort to clean it up. Even when the Chernobyl meltdown happened in a place called the Ukraine, we built a low-quality and hasty tomb around the site and put as much of the waste as possible in safe containment.

The closest my cycle had to the off-limits places you know have occurred on an island nation known as Japan. A plant there failed so completely after being hit by a tsunami that untold quantities of highly radioactive water went into the ocean along with radioactive dust, which covered farmland for miles.

One thing is certain with prolonged radiation exposure: mutation. Sometimes it kills the life form, sometimes it alters it. Enough radiation will kill any known life form but we never studied prolonged exposure to radiation from high-grade fuel rods, or what happens to creatures who drink the surface water containing particles from these rods. We do know that the venom mutates, as well, along with the bacteria, which naturally occurs in the mouths of certain creatures.

If I ask you to travel the direction of the setting sun two days by horse, stay there a day, then come back before completing the interview, will you do it?

SK: No, I'm on a deadline.

JS: You traveled here on horseback. You have no concept of deadline. What is the real reason you won't do it?

SK: It is a forbidden region. I could lose my job going there.

JS: Might I ask you how you got your job?

SK: I'm a reporter. I was assigned to cover this story.

JS: Very good. Now, how did you get your job?

SK: I don't understand what you are asking.

JS: Because you have no frame of reference for the question. You cannot provide an answer because you have no knowledge of Earth That Was. Back then, reporters were simply smiles and haircuts which looked good in front of the camera. They read stories off a teleprompter. Those stories were written by journalists. To become a journalist you had to attend a university or college to obtain a 4-year degree. Then, if you were lucky, you got a job covering stories instead of a job proofreading them. So, let me ask again, how did you get your job?

SK: I still have no idea what you are talking about. What is a college? A university? I was trained for this job by my father who had this job before me. It is how skills are passed to the next generation.

JS: I see.

SK: You see what?

JS: Sadly, how the rest of this interview is going to go. Oh well, it is much too late to wait for another.

The reason you won't go and spend a day where I asked is the same reason it is a forbidden region. Back in the day of Earth That Was, there was a facility there known as the Braidwood Station. It was a nuclear power plant powering much of what was then the northern end of a state called Illinois. It was the largest plant in the state. Like most plants, it stored its nuclear waste on-site because nobody ever put in place a method of recycling the spent fuel rods or eliminating the deadly radiation from them. When the earth spun and the land cracked, the containment facilities all crumbled. Most likely, there are still massive quantities of radiation being given off, since the half-life for that stuff was measured in thousands of years.

SK: So, were there really multiple wars and why were they called the Microsoft Wars?

JS: I can see that you have no intention of recording anything useful for your readership or posterity. What is your current circulation?

SK: We are the most trusted newspaper in the country. We have the widest circulation and most frequent distribution cycle: 5,500 readers look to us for information about the world, twice monthly.

JS: It sounds more like you provide them entertainment instead of journalism.

SK: Why is that?

JS: You are looking for the headline instead of the story. The same thing happened to the supposed news services back in the days of Earth That Was.

SK: Earth That Was?

JS: That picture hanging on the wall to my right. When you came in, you commented on it being a piece of art. Do you know what it really is?

SK: A painting of some kind.

JS: It's a map of Earth That Was printed out on an engineering printer, which took four-foot-wide rolls of paper and used what were called ink-jet cartridges. Once it was printed, it was run through a process the elders called lamination, which sealed it in some kind of clear substance to help preserve it. Otherwise, it would be yellowing like those books stacked to your left.

SK: That still doesn't explain Earth That Was.

JS: The seven continents.

SK: What are you talking about? There are twelve continents!

JS: Today, yes. Back in the day of Earth That Was, there were only seven continents and that is a map of them. The picture hanging beside it is a picture of Earth That Was taken from outer space on a clear day. As you can deduce from the map, it shows much of the North and South American continents.

SK: American?

JS: <sigh> What is the first continent you encounter today when heading in the direction of where our sun sets?

SK: Dians.

JS: What is the country we are in right now?

SK: Rica, but shouldn't you already...

JS: Back in the day of Earth That Was, Canada was a country occupying the northern portion of the North American continent and the United States of America occupied the lower portion of it before you got to this skinny connecting piece. The sun traveled from this edge to that edge of the continent each day.

After the events of 2013, or during, depending upon how you look at it, part of Canada became the land mass you now call the Dians continent. The rest of the North American continent also turned and split up. Some say it simply had an ocean form over part of it. The difference between split or sink doesn't really matter. Today, you cannot walk from one chunk to the other, so they are considered separate continents.

The country we live in now was once called America. Several other chunks floating around the globe were also part of America. You are having trouble believing what you have been told because some big pieces that are at the root of the story are under the ocean now. As a country, we no longer have any means of getting to them or taking pictures for others to see. At some point, perhaps we will regain that but not at this point.

SK: Do you really expect me to believe that you have hanging on your wall a picture taken from outer space? A beautiful picture in full color that was somehow taken while someone or something was in outer space and then given to you?

JS: It wasn't given, it was downloaded by my grandfather. Many people had them back at that time.

SK: Downloaded?

JS: Yes. With a thing called a computer over something called the Internet. America had some kind of organization known as NASA, which sent ships, satellites and people into outer space.

SK: Internet? People in outer space? I don't know what you've been drinking but it would have been polite to share!

JS: <chuckle> Do you see that black rectangle resembling a book sitting over there?

SK: Yes.

JS: On the front of it is a little ridge, which you can push to the right, then lift the top portion of it to open it. Good. Now near the bend where the two pieces come together is a button with a circle and a line sticking out of the circle.

SK: I see it.

JS: Press it.

SK: It is making noises. There are lights flashing. Things are appearing and disappearing on the top piece that feels like glass. What is OpenVMS?

JS: It is the most robust computer operating system ever created by man. Here, let me log in.

SK: Log in? Computer operating system?

JS: Yes. Computers with operating systems, which could support multiple users, assigned each user a user name and password. When you tried to gain access to such a computer, it would prompt you for the user name and password. If you provided values it recognized, it would allow you to sign onto the computer. It would also write information to a computer log file somewhere, much like a ship's manifest or a store's receipt, indicating who signed onto the computer, from where,

what they did, etc. Eventually, the culture surrounding these devices shortened the name to “log in” or sometimes “log on.”

SK: I have never seen or heard of such a thing. Is this some kind of witchcraft or peddler's trick?

JS: Earth That Was had a great many wonderful things. It also had horrible things. In the end, the Microsoft Wars were good for the planet because they eliminated the excess population and many horrible things. Oddly enough, the planet was about to do the same all on its own.

SK: What are you talking about?

JS: As I said, nothing I tell you will be of any use without a frame of reference. Here, now that it is booted, let me click on this slide show.

SK: Slide show? Oh, pictures. What are these?

JS: A series of photos of, from and about the international space station.

SK: The international space station?

JS: The cost of building, launching and assembling a new space station became too much for one country to bear. NASA teamed up with the space agencies of other countries, even those in countries that had not yet gone to space themselves, in order to build a series of modules, which could be launched into orbit and connected together to provide an ever-growing laboratory in space. Every country that participated managed to get some scientists assigned to the ISS for at least one tour of duty conducting experiments in zero gravity.

There! That picture is the same one you see on my wall. It was taken from the ISS on a clear day by one of the scientists.

SK: What has any of this got to do with the Microsoft Wars?

JS: As I said, frame of reference. Would it surprise you to learn that we, the people of Earth, sent many different science teams to the ISS over the years, but the last team must have all died.

SK: What do you mean must have?

JS: We have no way of knowing. There! Let me hit pause. See all of these people?

SK: Yes.

JS: This is the last team to ever be sent there. However, they died; it wasn't pretty.

SK: What are you talking about?

JS: When the Microsoft Wars started, the planet got distracted. A group of scientists had gone to the ISS with twelve months' worth of food and water. The air filtration system should have operated for years, if not decades. They had more than enough work for the four months they were supposed to be up there. Nobody gave them a second thought.

The various militaries focused on trying to win the war. The scientists focused on completing the mission. Before either group achieved their objective, we lost the ability to retrieve them. Eventually, we lost the ability to even communicate with them. Nobody knows how their lives ended and nobody really wants to know.

SK: You are simply making all of this up. I cannot believe I was sent all the way out here to talk with a madman!

JS: Do you see that tube sitting next to that folded-up tripod?

SK: Yes.

JS: It's a telescope. When it gets dark out, we will take it outside and point it up to find something, which looks very much like the pictures you just saw.

SK: It still exists? Why hasn't anyone written about this before?

JS: Yes, it is still up there. You will even see there are lights on in some sections. As to why nobody writes about it, that's easy—it was forbidden. The law has been on the books a long time in many different places. Before everything went to hell, the surviving governments banned conversation about it or writing of it in order to try salvaging the people's morale.

SK: That's absurd!

JS: Is it? How do you think an entire people would feel knowing there were seven of their own trapped in a tin can orbiting the planet and the only thing we could do was let them die of starvation or by their own hand?

As I said, you don't have a frame of reference to ask about the Microsoft Wars. You don't have any concept of Earth That Was. Until your readers have a concept of Earth That Was, they cannot begin to understand how we got here.

Please, let me shut this computer down. Once the battery fails to take a charge, I will never be able to use it again. I haven't heard of a place in the world that has the ability to make a new battery for it. Like many portable computers of its day, power passes through the battery instead of around it, so when the battery fails, the computer is useless. A sad, yet effective, marketing technique to sell more batteries.

SK: You mean to tell me someone knew all this information and when they passed a law, everybody went along with it, never talking about it?

JS: It only applied to the reporters and news outlets. The various governments of the world got in front of the story. Missions to the station were so commonplace that the vast majority of the world simply never thought about them. Whenever something really bad happened with the space station, we heard about it on the news or read about it in the paper, but normally, we heard nothing. It was just some project our tax dollars went to and we believed that some day, we might see some new medical advancements or some other such thing from it. The world was quite accustomed to the space program developing things, which trickled out to the general population, greatly improving the quality of life.

SK: Such as?

JS: Oh, there were lots of things but few exist today. There were transistor radios, microwave ovens and ballpoint pens, which could write upside down.

SK: Surely you're making this up!

JS: Do you see that white rectangular thing sitting on the counter back there?

SK: Yes.

JS: Walk back to it. There is a stone cup on the counter with tea in it. Touch and taste the tea to prove to yourself it has gone cold.

SK: Okay, so it has gone cold.

JS: Press the large rectangular button on the lower right of the device. Good. Now place the cup inside and close the door. On the keypad, which is the little rectangle of numbers, press the five twice, then hit start. Good. Wait for it to stop... now press the button to open the door and take the cup out.

SK: Ouch!

JS: That is a microwave oven and, as you have just learned, it still functions.

SK: So I'm supposed to take the other two on faith?

JS: Walk over to that desk. Pick up the silver pen, which is laying on its side in a small box. Hold your notepad over your head and write your name.

SK: Look at that...amazing!

JS: I don't have a transistor radio anymore—at least, not one that works. I wouldn't waste the batteries on one if I had it. Most likely, there aren't any radio stations left, anyway.

SK: Can we talk about the Microsoft Wars now?

JS: Orwell was right. Everyone was forced to read his book and yet, it still happened. In reality, that is all anybody needs to know.

SK: Orwell?

JS: <sighs> Back in 1949, an author by the name of George Orwell published a novel titled 1984. It was a look into the future and basically created the concept in society of Big Brother. This Big Brother was a government, any government really, which would watch over you like a child. Your life would be monitored and controlled 24 hours per day. The dictionary would not grow in size, but shrink, as words and thoughts were continually restricted. Anyone who possessed a

thought against the government, system or the way things were being run would be turned in by friends/family/neighbors as a thought criminal.

One by one, various ministries were set up to control every aspect of life, all for the betterment of society, and most had some plausible excuse bringing them into existence. There would be monitors installed everywhere, so you were continually watched and controlled. It was one of the best-selling and most widely talked-about books of all time. Many movies were created showing various flavors of the book.

SK: Well, if everybody knew about it, then it surely didn't happen.

JS: Not in 1984, no. The final vehicle for control wasn't chosen until the early 1990s and it took a while to roll out globally. Sometime during 2010, the governments around the world achieved 95 percent of what they wanted. The vast majority of citizens carried with them a 24-hour monitoring device, which could be accessed remotely and would, via GPS, give a complete picture of their travels. Each one had a unique ID. Best of all, the devices were marketed in such a way as to make people think they were nothing unless they had one and kept it with them at all times.

When it became apparent that some portions of society simply couldn't afford the devices—yes, each citizen paid for their own, and gladly...they even paid to customize them—most governments came up with some kind of ministry or program to ensure each and every person falling into the “cannot afford” category was issued one under some plausible story as “medical need” or “neighborhood watch.” This removed the poor-person-rejection-of-charity problem. Nobody felt insulted to receive the devices, since the devices allowed them to communicate with anyone at any time, as long as they knew the

other person's unique ID.

SK: Do you honestly expect me to believe that everybody stood in line to get a unique ID for the government to monitor them 24 hours per day, seven days per week?

JS: No. They didn't see it like that. They stood in line to get the latest and greatest cellphone with video camera, GPS, speaker phone, Internet access, and every other buzz phrase marketing could think of. If you don't know what any of that is, it doesn't matter. All you need to know is the more applications, called apps, it had, the more people wanted it.

Each phone had to have a phone number, which was globally unique so anyone in the world could call anybody else in the world, no matter where they were at the time. It was that "anywhere, anytime" communications capability that was a major selling point. A system of assigning phone numbers to allow for international calling had been in place for many years due to the older land line system, so it was simply leveraged.

Everyone proudly carried and used their government monitoring device. There were even crime shows on television showing how law enforcement agencies could track a cellphone as long as it was turned on. What they didn't tell you was that the phone would periodically report in even when turned off, and if certain instructions were waiting, it would turn itself back on, silently, so full monitoring could continue without the owner being aware.

The only thing that could truly stop monitoring was to remove the battery, then turn the cellphone on to drain the hidden reserve. When you did that, however, the phone was of no use.

SK: So let me get this straight—you're saying that there was a communications network that could monitor every person in the country?

JS: No. Before the middle of 2011, thanks to some production cost reductions, it was every person on the planet living in any civilized country and even many third world countries. A basic cellphone could be manufactured and sold for under \$20 retail, which put the actual production cost at about \$6. Those countries too poor or with terrain too rough used the satellite phones, which cost a bit more, but leveraged cellphone components to reduce costs. Both networks were monitored by government agencies, even though commercial companies were providing the services to the cellphone owners. Even children in third world countries who didn't have food to eat or a bank account in their name had a phone so they could be tracked.

SK: Just what does this cellphone story have to do with the Microsoft Wars?

JS: Far more than you are capable of understanding at this point. Do you even know what Microsoft was?

SK: An evil empire of some kind that met its destruction during the Microsoft Wars.

JS: Is this what is being taught where you come from? If that is all you know, then you really have no frame of reference to ask the question. Let me guess—you were sent on this mission because your father is the mayor, or whatever they call the leader of your town, and your mother runs the newspaper?

SK: My mother is the mayor of the city and my father runs the newspaper. I told you before that he trained me for my job. I am the most senior reporter and I don't like your insinuation that I'm not qualified to be here!

Now. Are you saying Microsoft wasn't an empire?

JS: It was a corporate empire, not a country or territorial empire. It was at the root of multiple wars, although it had no standing army or military of any kind.

SK: You aren't making any sense.

JS: As I said, you don't have a frame of reference so you cannot ask the question. Unless you understand some things about Earth That Was, you cannot begin to understand what the Microsoft Wars really were.

SK: How can knowing about a pen that writes upside down help one to understand what the Microsoft Wars were?

JS: Do you even know when the wars ended?

SK: Some say it was over 150 years ago; that is why so much has been lost.

JS: It all ended on November 13, 2013. It was sixty-eight years ago, next week. They ended the same day we got twelve continents, although it took a while to figure the continent part out. I was eleven years old at the time. There was no winner and no treaty was ever signed.

The Brine of Life

SK: How is that possible? How could we have lost all of these things and all of this knowledge in such a short time? How can a war end without a victor or a treaty of some kind, or at least one side claiming victory?

JS: There simply wasn't anybody left who cared.

SK: Now you are just making stuff up!

JS: How old are you?

SK: What has that got to do with anything, you dirty old man?!

JS: I'm not asking for *that* reason. How old are you? More importantly, how old is your father and how old is the oldest person you have either met or heard about?

SK: I'm 23. My father is 54. The oldest person I've ever heard of, before hearing your wild claims, was 62. So?

JS: The last gift of the war. Proof that there is no form of good that cannot and will not be corrupted if allowed to soak in the brine of life long enough.

SK: What are you talking about!?

JS: An outraged cucumber said to a pickle, "How can any self-respecting cucumber allow themselves to be pickled?" The pickle responded, "If you stay in the brine long enough, you become a pickle."

SK: So pickles are the secret to living as long as you?

JS: There was a national, some say multinational, charity that existed to save abused animals and prosecute the abusers. Very extreme segments of this charity thought all forms of meat should be banned and that nobody should wear any kind of fur or leather. People donated billions of dollars to the charity because you simply couldn't look at the images of tortured and abused animals they rescued without being moved.

Eventually the charity had massive legal and research wings. The donated monies not only went into the rescue/care/feeding of abused animals but also toward the prosecution of those who abused them, and it funded research on medical and nutrition issues for animals. It wasn't long before some of the most horribly maimed animals could be treated and lead long happy lives, once a caretaker reached them emotionally.

SK: And this has *what* to do with the Microsoft Wars?

JS: Around the same time, a massive, federally funded medical research project was underway. It was called "The Human Genome Project." Scientists were tasked with identifying every strand of DNA along with every gene and chromosome, or as many variations of each, as possible. The idea behind it was that for-profit drug companies wouldn't spend the money on this kind of research and make it public. Since many diseases had to do with genetics, this project would help quickly identify what gene or chromosome needed to be altered in a person's DNA to get rid of a genetic condition.

SK: Sounds like a noble goal. It has *what* to do with my question or the wars?

JS: One of the scientists working for the charity was part of the extreme sector. Not only did he believe it should be a capital offense to eat or prepare meat, he believed war should never kill an animal. The WMDs of the day took out entire cities, in many cases leaving only a massive crater and miles of debris. He took it upon himself to create a biological weapon that could be frozen and stored indefinitely. Once thawed, it would become waterborne and kill only humans. Animals could drink the water and host the virus for decades with no ill effects.

He identified three genes that existed in all humans, but no other species. He then created a biological weapon that would consume the chemicals making up those three genes, using them for both food and replication. Once thawed, it could live roughly seven days without a host. Once introduced to the human body, it replicated like wildfire, leaving malignant tumors in its wake. Most people were dead within eight days, once exposed.

SK: Most?

JS: Healthy infants and children under the age of three have immune systems that are in the process of exponential development. As long as they were healthy before they were exposed, their immune system was able to adjust faster than the virus.

Surviving the virus wasn't such a good thing, though. None of those children knew how to feed and care for themselves. Very few adults had a natural immunity so the children didn't have much for caretakers or teachers. Thousands simply starved to death or died from the diseases that develop from lying in one's own filth.

SK: Were that the case, the human species would have completely died off. We couldn't have repopulated in 68 years. I say this story is complete falsehood, sir!

JS: For the most part, it did. Civilization is currently regrouping, but it is a long way from rebuilding or recovering. You said your circulation was 5,500. Is it safe to assume that is most of the population of your city and surrounding area?

SK: Yes.

JS: Earth That Was had a city called New York, which had millions of people living in it. There existed a country called China, which had a population of roughly 1.3 billion...yes, billion with a B.

The day we got twelve continents, there were massive wind and tidal changes. To some extent, it stopped the spread of the virus, but it also preserved huge quantities of it in the new northern ice cap. Didn't you ever wonder why there are always stories about entire villages dying off in the span of just a few weeks?

SK: Well, most thought they were just propaganda put out to show how tough the northern people are.

JS: Yeah, right. Periodically, some of the ice containing the virus either melts or breaks off in one of those big icebergs. It floats to the new south, melting along the way. Any animal that drinks the contaminated water can carry the virus for years without obvious harm to themselves. Even fish can carry it. Once the carrier is eaten by a human, it begins the cycle again. Cities and villages are spread far enough apart up north that a single infection case doesn't spread outside but it does tend to kill everyone inside that village.

SK: How is it you are still alive and older than anyone else?

JS: I was never infected. My family saw what was coming when the Microsoft Wars started and we built a bunker to hole up in. I almost didn't bother to finish the bunker, though.

SK: And I'm supposed to take this bunker story of yours on faith?

JS: No. At the rear of this house is a very large steel door, which reveals steps going down. While it may seem like a large place, it really sucked being trapped in there for ten years, waiting for everything to settle down.

SK: So, you and the founders of Fieldspring have common ancestry then?

JS: Fieldspring?

SK: You mean to tell me you live two days' ride from the second largest city in our country and you've never heard of it? They claim their ancestors came out of a bunker, as well.

JS: Oh. You mean Springfield. At least that's what it was called before the war. Their *ancestors* were elected officials, who used taxpayer dollars to build a bunker to preserve the government.

Because they didn't manage to even preserve the name of the city, I feel it is safe to assume their bunker was a typical government-funded project.

SK: Typical government-funded project?

JS: Overpriced hunk of shit built by construction companies that paid a lot of bribes to get the contract, then used substandard materials, like what happened with the tollway system.

SK: Tollway system?

JS: Never mind. It is best that term never see the light of day again. It was a bad idea from the start and turned out to be its own form of virus, spreading corruption and lousy work ethics to the world.

SK: If this bunker saved your life as you claim, why did you *almost* not build it.

JS: There was little point once it got down to me and my grandfather.

SK: Please explain.

JS: I buried my father six weeks after I buried my mother. Both died from that virus you think is a myth.

SK: Oh, sorry to hear.

JS: We were lucky. Our bunker was built on land that survived the realignment. A good number of bunkers were built in places that are now under the various oceans.

Well... *I* was lucky. The one thing we didn't design into our bunker, mostly due to the time constraint, was something to deal with dead bodies. My grandfather died two months after we sealed the door.

SK: From the virus?!?

JS: He was a very old man. Quite honestly, I think he gave up. He did his best to carry on for his grandson, but in the end, the loss of his son and daughter-in-law weighed heavily on him. So did taking care of a preteen boy while being trapped in a bunker, I imagine, but he never let on. I was the last of his bloodline after all. He was very proud of his bloodline.

SK: Okay. Perhaps you could explain what you meant by "brine of life"? Was this "the wemdies"?

JS: <chuckle> W. M. D. Weapons of mass destruction. These were weapons that, ultimately, could allow 15 people to take over the world.

SK: Oh come on, 15 people? Seriously?

JS: At first we created nuclear weapons that would atomize everything inside of one square mile, destroy property and kill most people within six miles, while leaving toxic radioactive fallout for hundreds, if not thousands, of miles. Eventually, we progressed to nuclear weapons, which could be launched on a single rocket that would travel around the world and have a blast radius of roughly 60 miles.

Others perfected toxins and poisons so deadly that a tiny grain, so small the human eye could barely see, when allowed to evaporate in a room with a drop of water, could kill over a thousand people. Like the nuclear weapons, once these weapons were created, there was virtually no safe method of disposal or long-term storage.

Most believe the final group of WMDs were biological. Various scientists worked to weaponize common bacteria and viruses. What I mean by “weaponize” is they made them intensely resistant to any known treatments, increased their longevity and created various methods of dispersal, be it airborne, direct contact or via a city's water supply.

SK: You said “most believe.”

JS: Nice catch.

SK: Thank you.

JS: Science fiction writers had toyed with various planet-cracker-type bombs and planet-eater-type doomsday scenarios for decades. Some even wrote about massive energy weapons, which could fire a beam of energy that looked like light so big

and powerful that it could vaporize a planet just like the inner blast radius of a nuclear detonation.

Of course, various scientists poo-pooed the very idea of a planet-cracker bomb. They always stated that the gravity of a planet would prevent it from ever being destroyed by an outside force. They also scoffed at the amount of energy that would be required to vaporize a planet.

SK: I take it not all scientists felt that way?

JS: No. Gravity, that thing which makes an apple fall from a tree to the ground, could never be explicitly defined or replicated. When we launched people and satellites into outer space, we proved the existence of gravity. Various vehicles and amusement rides of the day could temporarily simulate the *weightlessness* of zero gravity. But we had no device or method of creating gravity in outer space, where little to none existed.

SK: So?

JS: Furthermore, we had ample evidence that planets could be destroyed.

SK: I still want an answer on this gravity thing but what evidence could you possibly have that planets could be destroyed?

JS: What do you see when you look up into the sky on a clear night?

SK: The moon and stars, like everybody else.

JS: And what do you occasionally see on very special nights?

SK: What? Do you mean a shooting star?

JS: Those aren't stars. Technically they were called meteorites, unless the rock you found wasn't, then it was called a meteor wrong.

SK: Huh?

JS: Sorry. It's a very old joke. Those things you call shooting stars are meteors. They are the debris left over or cast out by a moon or planet's destruction.

SK: And that proves or proved what?

JS: That there are conditions where gravity, whatever it is, won't hold a planet together. The secret then, is, and was, to build a device of some sort which can replicate one or more of those conditions...once you figured out what those conditions were.

SK: So, you are saying the people who lived on this planet before the Microsoft Wars knew the conditions that could destroy a planet?

JS: They knew one, which turned out to be more than enough.

SK: Why is that?

JS: The only people interested in funding the research into gravity were the people and entities looking to build a planet-cracker bomb. Had the job been easy, this planet wouldn't be here today. We had a lot of psychopaths running around back then, and all of them claimed to be doing God's work.

SK: God?

JS: Ask that question a bit later, okay?

SK: Okay, but what do psychopaths have to do with gravity and planet cracking?

JS: A massive amount of research proved that it was impractical to attempt to overpower gravity from the outside. One of the dominant theories about planet destruction was that it was most common when two planets collided or a large asteroid with a planet or a comet. This led to many theories about the *how* of the destruction.

One theory was that the gravity of the colliding object was of the exact same polarity as the object being impacted, which exponentially increased the force of the impact with the polarity of each object attempting to repel the other, long before contact. As the event horizon for the repel energy crossed over the portions of the planet or moon, the *bonding* or *cohesive* effect of gravity would be voided, and those portions of the planet or moon would break off. The first object to lose pieces of itself generally lost the engagement.

Another theory was that the gravity of the colliding object was of the exact opposite polarity. As the gravity of the two objects attempted to attract each other, they increased the speed of the impacting object. Likewise, when the event horizon crossed the solid portions of the planet or moon, the pull on the *new* side would be stronger than the pull from the other side, and portions would break off to join the other object.

SK: And this has what to do with my question?

JS: All of this led to a conversation about what gravity really was and a debate about whether the planet really had to have a north and south pole to maintain its gravity.

SK: You aren't making any sense.

JS: From there, the great minds determined that gravity, at least in part, must be based on magnetic properties. They all knew how to defeat various magnetic devices and fields, and most believed that the iron core of the planet was largely

magnetic, giving us our north and south poles.

SK: So?

JS: So they combined two of the biggest weaponry advancements of the day, a bunker-buster bomb and a nuke. The bunker-buster was designed to spin/chew/drill, or otherwise penetrate, all of the concrete, re-bar and steel plating protecting an underground bunker. It was extremely heavy and provided a hardened enclosure to protect its payload until it could drill no more and would detonate that payload.

SK: I'm not following this.

JS: Early bunker-busters never had to move through more than half a mile of earth before churning through thirty to sixty feet of concrete, steel and re-bar. Scientists took what they learned in the various desert wars and envisioned a design that would be able to drill through over 1,500 miles of dirt and rock to get halfway to the earth's core or more.

SK: Are you trying to tell me that there is a hole somewhere on this planet that is 1,500 miles deep?

JS: Goodness, no. They could never *test* this design. It had to be built assuming it would work when needed.

SK: So you are telling me you can blow the planet up if you place a big enough pile of explosives at least 1,500 miles deep?

JS: Not explosives—the biggest nuke we had. You weren't paying attention when we talked about magnets and gravity. Among the many things released when a nuke detonates is an invisible shock wave known as an EMP or electromagnetic pulse. Any electrical device that is powered on when the EMP passes by will be fried and, more importantly, unshielded magnets will get scrambled. We learned this in July of 1962 with the Starfish Prime explosion. A small, 1.4-megaton

detonation knocked out street lights in Hawaii over 1,400 miles away.

Remember, I told you one of the main theories was that gravity, or some portion of it, was based on magnetic energy. One of the main theories of planet destruction was that two planets, or a large object and a planet, would mostly shred before impact because the like magnetic poles would be trying to either repel or attract each other, thus no longer holding the original objects together.

SK: I'm having trouble understanding what this has to do with anything.

JS: Have you ever seen two children fighting over a toy?

SK: Of course.

JS: Have you ever seen one of those children break the toy when someone in authority told them they had to share?

SK: Not often but yes.

JS: Those children never grow up. They simply become old enough to be called adults. Their philosophy in life never changes: "If they can't have it, nobody can."

SK: I'm still not following.

JS: Those are the people who had the money to fund the research. If they didn't get their way and eventually manage to rule the world, there would be no world to rule.

SK: So that's what ended the Microsoft Wars? This bomb that was supposed to destroy the planet.

JS: What? No. The people who controlled that got killed off in the third wave of attacks, long before the situation could have remotely warranted them using it.

SK: Why did you tell me all of this then? Our readers want to know about the Microsoft Wars, not some mythical bomb and a bunch of theories.

JS: It isn't mythical.

SK: What?

JS: I've often wondered how they got it up there. The thing weighed over 65 tons. According to all the records of the day, no country had a launch vehicle that could have put it in orbit, but it's up there. Some day, it will be back down here again.

SK: Huh?

JS: What goes up must come down.

SK: What does *that* have to do with anything?

JS: Everything. Every satellite ever put in orbit will eventually run out of fuel and/or suffer a mechanical failure that prevents it from maintaining its orbit. Once that happens, that gravity we discussed earlier will slowly but surely pull the satellite home.

SK: You mean to tell me that thing is eventually going to come down and wipe us all out no matter what we do?

JS: Don't know.

SK: What do you mean you don't know? You know everything else about it. How could you not know this?

JS: I didn't build it. I don't know if it was designed to launch when it suffered damage or simply hang tight and crash back into the atmosphere, irradiating thousands of square miles as it goes.

SK: So it might only kill some of us?

JS: Perhaps. Unless science evolves rather quickly and we develop a method of destroying it in orbit.

SK: What does all of this have to do with anything?

JS: Remember the child and the broken toy?

SK: Yes.

JS: Well, the children with that philosophy made enough money with cellphones to build this bomb.

SK: I thought you said the cellphones were used to monitor people.

JS: They were but remember, for most people those cellphones weren't free.

SK: Why did you lead me down a gilded path talking about this biological wemdy if what we really have to fear is this bomb?

JS: No gilded path intended. People die each year from that wemdy. Like those forbidden zones, it's a legacy of the wars. Until we have enough global warming to completely melt all ice caps for at least seven days, we will never be certain all of the virus or whatever it was has been completely released.

SK: You actually *want* that?

JS: Remember, without a host, it can live seven days, at most.

SK: But the infected animals?

JS: As long as they are fully cooked and handled properly, they present no danger. When one wild animal eats another, the wemdy doesn't spread, so it would be nice if all of the ice would melt for a week or two...assuming it doesn't try to flood

us all off the planet again.

SK: I can't believe I'm hearing this.

JS: You would rather people venturing north and drinking from a clear running stream die a horrible death?

SK: We already have forbidden zones; we can simply declare more.

JS: Do you know how far water can travel in seven days?

SK: No.

JS: Then tell me, how would you determine the boundaries for these new forbidden zones? The old zones are pretty easy to spot.

SK: Well, I'm certain our leaders could come up with something.

JS: And the leaders of the other countries around the ice cap? The countries you've never managed to speak with or don't get along with?

SK: Oh. I hadn't thought of that.

JS: Your leaders have.

SK: Really?

JS: Yes. They've been quietly working on a vaccine as best they can.

SK: So they plan to make everybody immune to this wemdy!

JS: Not everybody.

SK: What do you mean?

JS: They only plan to immunize everyone in this country, while putting out stories about all of the riches being found near the ice caps.

SK: They wouldn't!

JS: What?! They wouldn't take advantage of a weapon they didn't launch to wipe out all other countries and create an empire? Guess again!

Do you know who your leaders really are? Remember the children who broke the toy and built the bomb? Well, they hired other children to hunt down the children who broke the toy and built the virus once they found out about it. Descendants of the hunters are who lead, you now. You should actually thank the children who broke the toy and built the virus because the virus killed off the children who built the bomb before they could drop the bomb from orbit.

Welcome to the brine of life. Float in the brine long enough and you will become a pickle.

Nukes and Nots

SK: This may sound strange at this point but what the hell is a nuke? You have mentioned nuclear power, nuclear waste, nuclear weapons and now a *nuke*, but if I don't have any idea what you are talking about. How are my readers supposed to understand?

JS: Good.

SK: Good what?

JS: You are starting to understand what you don't understand. You may eventually turn out to be a good reporter, not a journalist, but a good reporter at least.

SK: What is the difference?

JS: We will get to that later. There is a whole lot of science behind your first question. Far more than I understand. Do the school books where you come from cover the topic of molecules and atoms?

SK: You mean, like the periodic table of the elements?

JS: Yes, exactly. One of those elements, uranium, has about six naturally occurring isotopes. No, don't ask. I have to quote big words from memory here and I don't have the definitions at hand. One of the most common forms is U-238.

Scientists found out that they could enrich U-238, adding various pieces of other atoms, turning it into something that could be used as either fuel for a nuclear reactor or enriched further to become the core of a nuclear bomb.

All anyone really needs to know is that all forms of uranium and some forms of other elements gave off an invisible and deadly energy wave known as radiation. While you do not see the wave itself, if you venture near the forbidden zones, you can see the effects of prolonged exposure to very low levels of this radiation.

Have you ever seen images from those forbidden zones?

SK: Of course, everyone who ever attended school has. We've seen the distorted plants and bizarre insects.

JS: Well, even depleted uranium gives off some level of radiation.

SK: And that is what a nuke is?

JS: No, it's a symptom. Many electrons and various types of radiation are given off whenever an atom is forced to split. I don't understand the science but when enriched uranium was formed into rods or bars, and those bars are placed inside of a container with graphite or carbon bars interspersed, the resulting nuclear fission or splitting of atoms releases massive amounts of heat and radiation. When water is circulated around the container with some kind of radiation shield that lets heat out and keeps the radiation contained, the heat could instantly create steam from water. The steam was then used to turn turbines for electric and other energy. That was nuclear energy.

Scientists also found out that if you didn't control the chain reaction of fission, with those carbon rods and containers, a tiny amount of enriched uranium could create a massive explosion, larger than anything that could be created with gunpowder. Eventually, they came up with different methods of enrichment: one to produce fuel and the other to produce something that would make a gigantic boom when properly detonated. Military types chose to refer to nuclear weapons as *nukes*. The

short phrase, which evolved to indicate someone wanted a nuclear strike, was “nuke 'em.”

SK: So these forbidden zones are all from the nuclear power plants that once existed?

JS: Not all. Some were storage sites for nuclear missiles and bombs. Others were due to the enrichment facilities. Still others were places where nukes were made. A few exist because the supposedly *safe* disposal sites weren't so *safe*. There is plenty of blame to go around.

SK: What was the purpose of all this nuclear stuff if it was so dangerous?

JS: Clean, limitless, near-free electrical power.

SK: So everybody had nearly free electricity?

JS: Gosh, no. That was just the marketing pitch. Nuclear power cost more than any other form of electricity, especially when you add in the human and animal lives.

SK: Why would anyone want it then?

JS: Nuclear power provided cover for enriching uranium and building nuclear bombs. All of the militaries wanted to watch their enemy cringe in fear from the mere threat of a nuclear strike.

SK: Did that really happen?

JS: Oh yes, eventually.

SK: After everybody learned about the potential damage?

JS: Goodness, no. Nobody is scared when you talk about *potential* damage. It isn't real. Everybody believes it won't happen to them or that they can, in some way, mitigate the damage so that it isn't really noticed. People didn't cringe until

after a world war was brought to an end by dropping two of those bombs on two different major cities.

SK: Was this one of the Microsoft Wars?

JS: No. It was the Second World War.

SK: Did nukes play a role in the Microsoft Wars?

JS: Yes.

SK: What role did nukes play?

JS: You aren't ready for that yet. You don't even know how two small ones ended the Second World War.

SK: Small ones? You mean we, or someone, built bigger ones?

JS: Yes. As I told you before, they increased in size and potential damage—all the way up to those planet crackers we talked about earlier. I have no knowledge of any larger ones, but I would believe there were at least plans on paper to build bigger and better. Everybody was caught up in the one nuke to win a war race.

SK: Was there ever a war won by a single nuke?

JS: No. Many wars were prevented because of the massive stockpiles. Limited wars were started in other countries that didn't have nukes, so one country could drag another country into a war of attrition. International political pressure always seemed to stop actual deployment of nukes during these conflicts.

SK: Nuclear wars weren't wars of attrition?

JS: Not for the side with the nukes. The side that was attacked with them would suffer massive population attrition in seconds.

For centuries, armies had destroyed large population centers by laying siege to them. It took days, if not months or years, to capture and level a city of significant size and fortification. Thousands of lives would be lost on both sides. This cost, more than anything else, stopped countries from going to war.

If only one side had nuclear weapons, there was no real cost to wiping out a city. Perhaps they would lose a few planes and air crew if they didn't have long-range missiles but attrition wasn't a factor. The Second World War ended when the world learned this. The United States suffered no casualties dropping nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but both cities, for all practical purposes, ceased to exist, taking roughly a quarter million Japanese with them. They left a wake of illness and ash that plagued the people for years.

SK: How could anyone justify that?

JS: It's easy when you did the math. Each island battle in that protracted war was costing thousands of troops on both sides. Unspeakable atrocities were being committed against prisoners and civilians alike. The Japanese government had organized all citizens on the main island to defend the emperor with whatever weapons they had at hand when the invasion finally happened.

War had been going on for over four years. Final estimates put the combined civilian and military dead somewhere between 40 to 60 million. Yes, that's correct—40 to 60 million. When the final enemy tells you they are going to fight to the last person despite that kind of hardship having already occurred, you look for *any* tool that will change the attrition factor.

SK: But killing a quarter million with only two bombs. That would be the equivalent of wiping out our entire

population.

JS: No matter how horrible you think it was, those two bombs saved a lot of lives on both sides. Estimates of what it would have cost to take the rest of the islands based upon the early engagements say that it would have cost somewhere between 11 and 35 million more lives before the current conventional war would have ended.

Wiping out two cities, three days apart, without losing any lives was something that had not been done before. The shock and awe it caused in both the Japanese government and the civilian population allowed Japan to justify surrender.

The rest of the world learned a lot from those bombings and the subsequent rebuilding of Japan. For the first time, we knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that radiation sickness wasn't something theoretical. Aid workers sent to Japan documented the slow and horrible death most suffered from radiation poisoning. We learned how to measure residual radiation and what black rain was.

Oddly enough, a thing that caused so much death and destruction ended up providing scientific data that would lead to x-ray machines and treatments for some kinds of cancer.

SK: Sounds like you are trying to put a positive spin on it.

JS: It's not a matter of spin. The sad truth is, few things advance science and technology more than large-scale warfare. It appears humans are destined to kill each other in order to improve the species.

SK: That's a rather cold statement and not to be believed by many.

JS: Only because the oldest person you know is 62 and you don't have a library with books much older than that.

SK: How can you be certain of that?

JS: All of the history books covered the Second World War and the first use of nuclear weapons. If you have any older books, they must be grammar or math. Even the dictionaries had the definition of a nuke.

SK: We *have* old books!

JS: Old compared to what?

SK: Older than you.

JS: So you say, but were they worth saving or did they just happen to survive?

SK: We treasure our central library. It is the largest one in the known world. It occupies 3,000 square feet on the second floor of our government building.

JS: A whole 3,000 square feet you say? I bet it's a real treasure trove. Answer me this: When you print your newspaper, is it done with a massive machine that feeds giant rolls of paper while printing on both sides of each sheet, and then cutting and folding in the same pass?

SK: No. I've never heard of such a thing. We have two presses that use large sheets of paper. We set up the front side of all pages in one press and the back side in the other. We run all of the sheets through the first press, then turn them over and run them through the second.

JS: Ah, you have a sheet fed press with moveable type.

SK: Yes, I believe that is what it is called, so what?

JS: Do any of those books in your massive library tell you who invented the printing press or when?

SK: Why... I'm not certain.

JS: You have electricity in your city, do you not?

SK: Yes, in some of it. At the newspaper, definitely. It is generated by a large dam on the river where we get our drinking water.

JS: Do any of those wonderful books in your library tell you who discovered electricity or how to build a generator?

SK: I'm sure one of them must.

JS: You are, are you? Well then, are your presses operated by electric motors?

SK: Of course.

JS: Do any of those motors have a metal tag stating their specifications and who made them?

SK: Yes. I've seen that while helping with the printing when I first started. They said something like Leman from some place called Wee.

JS: I will hazard a guess that you really mean Leeson Electric out of a state called Wisconsin, which was abbreviated to W and I by the post office.

SK: That could be it. Now that I think about it, I think you are right, although I've never heard of Wisconsin.

JS: It used to be a state north of us. Old north that is. Now most of it is under that body of water to the east.

SK: I really find all of this hard to believe, as will our readers.

JS: Fine. You tell me where Wisconsin is.

SK: I can't.

JS: Just like you can't tell me who invented the printing press, who, by the way, was a man called Gutenberg around 1440—at least during this cycle. Just like you can't tell me who built that dam, which is providing power to your city, or tell me how it provides power. Just like you can't tell me why only part of your city has power and the rest doesn't.

SK: Well, yes.

JS: At least I can answer that last part. The part of your city that doesn't have electricity is new. In order to wire a house, you need various gauges of insulated electrical wire, circuit breaker panels, wall outlets and switches, along with light fixtures and bulbs. You no longer have access to factories that make all of the components.

Instead of not believing what I say, you should ask yourself how it is you are using devices hundreds of years old when your recorded history only goes back 62 years.

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